

Jump TO Article



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Jump TO Article

BOOK REVIEWS:

The unravelling: high hopes and missed opportunities in Iraq

by Emma Sky

Atlantic Books: New York; 2015; 382 pp.; ISBN 9781782392576 (hardcover); RRP \$39.99



I first encountered Emma Sky when briefing General Odierno in late 2008. She was not introduced and sat unobtrusively beside the Commanding General. An inquisitive elfin-like character, Sky observed and listened to my brief to the General. Unlike Odierno's many questions, she asked just one; but it was very good one. I had to ask my boss who she was after we left the room – suspecting she was some kind of CIA station chief. But no – Sky was there as a civilian advisor to provide a different perspective on the war and the myriad of challenges facing Odierno.

The Unravelling is Sky's memoir of her experiences in Iraq between 2003 and 2010; and reflections between 2012 and mid-2014. Her story is closely intertwined with that of General Raymond Odierno who spent a total of more than five years in Iraq in three different command appointments. It is part of General Odierno's greatness as a commander that he realized he needed the independent viewpoint that Sky could provide to avoid the 'groupthink' that so often characterises military command. He made her his indispensable aide, and she stayed by his side, not only during his tour as the deputy commander in Iraq in 2006-2008, but also when he was the top commander, from 2008 to 2010.

There was no more unlikely duo than the hulking, 6-foot-5 former football player with the shaved head and his petite English adviser. To add to the incongruity, Sky needed Odierno relentlessly in a way that no one else would have dared – and he returned the favour. As a British female civilian, Sky's account contains a unique analysis of the course of the war and assessment of how and why the Iraq adventure ultimately failed. In the preface she states that the book "describes the challenges of nation building and how the overthrow of an authoritarian regime can lead to state collapse and conflict".

Sky had come to assist the American war effort in Iraq by chance in 2003 after having spent a decade as a humanitarian worker in the Middle East. Employed by the British Council, a cultural organisation sponsored by the Foreign Office, she received an email asking for volunteers to help the Coalition Provisional Authority in Iraq. Single, 30-something, and somewhat of an Arabist, she raised her hand and wound up in Kirkuk, where she eventually became political adviser to Colonel William Mayville, commander of the United States Army's 173rd Airborne Brigade.

Sky had no experience of the military and was "wary" of her new colleagues. Upon first meeting Mayville, she threatened to haul him to The Hague if he did anything that violated the Geneva Convention. "I took my brown Filofax with me everywhere," she writes, "and began documenting everything Colonel Mayville said and did." Before long, however, she realized that behind his "bravado was a deep intellect – and a wicked sense of humour". She developed such admiration and affection for the soldiers of the brigade

that when they rotated home in early 2004 she "sobbed inconsolably all afternoon".

She won the confidence of top United States military officials, among them General Odierno, who became a friend, confidant and mentor. Two years later Sky was back in Britain when she received an email out the blue from Odierno. It was time for the prosecution of 'the surge': would she help? Sky became Odierno's key political advisor, and found herself at the very heart of United States operations during the perilous and volatile days of the surge. At the end of 2007 she left once more, but almost immediately was recalled for a final tour, when once again Odierno sought her help. This time she worked alongside him until September 2010, leaving only when United States combat operations ended.

Sky's original assignment was only supposed to last three months. She went on to serve there longer than any other senior military or diplomatic figure, giving her an unrivalled perspective of the entire conflict. Sky was valued for her knowledge of the region and her outspoken voice. She became a tireless witness to American efforts to transform a country traumatized by decades of war, sanctions, and brutal dictatorship; to insurgencies and civil war; to the planning and implementation of the surge and the subsequent drawdown of United States troops; to the corrupt political elites who used sectarianism to mobilize support.

With sharp detail and tremendous empathy, Sky provides unique perspectives on the United States military as well as the complexities, diversity, and evolution of Iraqi society. In recognition of her service in Iraq, Sky was made a Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE) in 2003 and an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in 2008.

When Odierno last departed Iraq in September 2010 the United States military presence continued to drawdown for a further 15 months until the end of 2011. Sky left with Odierno in 2010 but later visited Iraq three times between January 2012 and July 2014. This last part of her book covering this period is less informed by first-hand experiences or research of machinations at the higher echelons. It also stops short of the replacement of Nouri al-Maliki by Haider al-Abadi as prime minister and the return of United States and allied forces in August 2014 in the 'new' war between the Iraqi government and the forces of the Islamic State.

In her preface Sky states: "If we refuse to honestly examine what took place there, we will miss the opportunity to better understand when and how to respond to instability in the world"; but her memoir offers little strategic analysis or finite suggestions on how that might be achieved. Nonetheless, her account adds to the sources for historians and analysts to perhaps perform this role in future. But I am fairly certain that Sky would be even more flummoxed by

(Continued on page 35)

BOOK REVIEWS:

The unravelling... *(Continued from page 33)*

developments in Iraq since mid-2014 and of the view that nothing substantive has been learned.

The Unravelling includes two maps of Iraq and a number of black and white photographs embedded in the text. There is a useful list of abbreviations at the start as well as glossary of political parties and militias at the end. The index is comprehensive.

Sky ended up disenchanted with the United States administration she had once supported: "Biden was a nice man, but he simply had the wrong instincts on Iraq. If only

Obama had paid attention to Iraq ... but his only interest in Iraq was in ending the war." By contrast, her respect for the United States military and in particular for Odierno – who warned the administration of al-Maliki's authoritarian tendencies – was never higher. He told her: "I gave my best military advice". She laments: "But he had been ignored". *The Unravelling* sub-title "High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq" is as fitting an epitaph as any.

In writing *The Unravelling* Sky has become the unlikely eulogist of the war in Iraq between 2003 and 2010. Her account is insightful, reflective and well considered; it deserves attention.

Marcus Fielding